From Hussites to Quakers

by

Edward Grabczewski

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Preface for Friends

This booklet grew out of a simple recognition. While reading the words of a fifteenth-century Christian thinker, Petr Chelčický, I found myself repeatedly encountering ideas that felt quietly familiar. They were not expressed in Quaker language, nor framed within Quaker practice, yet they arose from the same inward seriousness: a refusal of violence, a distrust of power, an insistence that truth must be lived without exception, and a conviction that obedience to Christ cannot be enforced.

Friends have often understood their testimonies as discoveries rather than inventions — insights that emerge when the Light is taken seriously and followed through into daily life. The figures and movements explored here suggest that such discoveries have occurred before, in other times and under very different conditions.

This is not a work of institutional history, nor an argument for lineage or influence. It is an exercise in recognition. It asks what may be learned when Friends listen attentively to earlier voices who wrestled with the same questions of faithfulness, power, and community, and who reached conclusions that still challenge forces at work in the present.

I offer these reflections to Friends in the hope that they may encourage thoughtful reading, quiet discussion, and renewed attention to the inward demands of the Gospel.

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Introduction

Why This Story Matters to Friends

Friends are often asked where the Quaker testimonies came from. Historically, the answer points to seventeenth-century England: to George Fox, early Meetings, persecution, and the slow shaping of a disciplined community grounded in the direct guidance of Christ. That history is real and sufficient. And yet, when Friends encounter earlier voices from Christian history, there is sometimes a moment of quiet recognition — a sense that the same inward questions were being asked long before the name "Quaker" existed. This booklet is written for that moment of recognition.

It does not argue for a direct historical descent from the Hussites to the Quakers. There is no documentary line that runs neatly from fifteenth-century Bohemia to seventeenth-century England. Instead, what emerges is something subtler and perhaps more important: a recurring pattern of Christian faithfulness that reappears whenever believers take the teachings of Christ with full seriousness and refuse to separate faith from conduct.

Again and again in Christian history, reform movements have reached a point of decision. Some have sought accommodation with political power, believing that reform could be secured by authority, law, or force. Others have attempted to impose the Kingdom of God by violence, convinced that righteousness must be defended or established by the sword. Still others have rejected structure altogether, dissolving discipline in the name of spiritual freedom.

Alongside these paths, less visible but more enduring, runs another way: a refusal of coercion, hierarchy, and violence, combined with a deep insistence on moral responsibility, truthfulness, and community discipline. This way is costly. It offers no protection from persecution and no guarantee of success. Yet it appears repeatedly, carried by people who discover — often in isolation — that obedience to Christ cannot be reconciled with domination, compulsion, or bloodshed.

For Friends, much of this will sound familiar. The refusal of oaths, the rejection of outward sacraments, the peace testimony, the insistence that truth must be lived at all times and not merely spoken — these are not accidental features of Quakerism. They arise from a particular understanding of what it means to follow Christ inwardly and outwardly, without appeal to force.

The figures and movements explored in the following pages belong to a world very different from our own. Their language, assumptions, and circumstances were shaped by medieval Christendom, feudal society, and violent upheaval. And yet, in their struggle to live faithfully without power, they confront questions that remain alive today.

This booklet begins with Jan Hus, whose witness cracked the surface of medieval unity. It then traces how that fracture widened into sharply divergent paths — some turning toward compromise, some toward violence, some toward excess — before coming to rest, quietly and firmly, in the thought of Petr

Chelčický. In Chelčický's *Net of Faith*, Friends may recognise not an ancestor in name, but a kindred spirit in substance: a Christian who refused both the sword and the sanctuary of power, and who insisted that the Gospel must be lived whole.

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Chapter 1

Jan Hus and the Shock of Conscience

Jan Hus did not set out to found a movement. He was not a revolutionary, nor a system-builder, nor a designer of a new church. He was, rather, a preacher and teacher who took seriously the gap he perceived between the life of the Church and the life of Christ.

Living in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Bohemia, Hus served as a priest and university rector in Prague. Like others before him, he was troubled by the moral condition of the Church: the sale of indulgences, the accumulation of wealth by clergy, and the distance between the Gospel proclaimed and the life actually lived. His call was not initially radical. It was a call to integrity — to allow Scripture, rather than institutional convenience, to judge Christian life.

Jan Hus

Two features of Hus's work are especially important for what followed.

First, he insisted that the authority of Christ, as revealed in Scripture, stood above all human authority, including that of popes and councils. When church leaders acted contrary to the Gospel, obedience to Christ required resistance — not rebellion in arms, but faithfulness of conscience. This conviction would later prove explosive.

Second, Hus preached in the language of the people. By teaching and preaching in Czech rather than Latin, he affirmed that the Gospel belonged to the whole community, not merely to a clerical elite. Faith was not something mediated exclusively by office or ritual; it addressed the conscience directly.

Hus was not alone in these convictions, but circumstances thrust him into a position he neither sought nor escaped. Summoned to the Council of Constance under a promise of safe conduct, he was tried, condemned for heresy, and burned at the stake in 1415. His execution was meant to close a question. Instead, it opened one.

For many in Bohemia, Hus's death was not merely an injustice; it was a moral shock. It exposed a painful contradiction between the Church's claim to represent Christ and its willingness to destroy a man whose primary offence was to insist on truthfulness and reform. The issue was no longer only theological. It had become existential: could a church that silenced conscience by fire still be trusted to speak for God?

What followed was not a single response but a spectrum of reactions. Some sought compromise, hoping to preserve unity while conceding limited reform.

Others concluded that violence was now unavoidable, and that the true faith must be defended by arms. Still others pressed beyond reform altogether, rejecting structure and authority in the name of spiritual freedom.

Execution of Jan Hus

Jan Hus did not choose among these paths; he did not live to see them unfold. Yet his witness made them unavoidable. By placing conscience above institutional power, he fractured the surface of medieval Christianity. Once cracked, it could not be made whole again.

The chapters that follow explore what emerged from that fracture — and why, amid upheaval and division, one quiet voice insisting on nonviolence, truthfulness, and disciplined faithfulness would prove unexpectedly enduring.

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Chapter 2

When Reform Divides: Utraquists, Taborites, and Pikarts

The execution of Jan Hus did not produce a single reform movement, but a crisis of direction. Those who had been united in protest against corruption and injustice now faced a deeper question: *how was faithfulness to Christ to be lived in a world shaped by power, violence, and authority?*

The responses that followed were not abstract theological debates. They were practical, urgent, and costly. They concerned the use of force, the legitimacy of authority, the meaning of obedience, and the shape of Christian community. Out of this turmoil emerged several distinct paths, often grouped under the broad name "Hussite," but in reality sharply divergent in spirit.

The Utraquists: Reform Through Compromise

The largest and most enduring group were the **Utraquists**, sometimes called the "moderates." Their name derived from *utraque specie* — communion in both kinds — the demand that laypeople receive both bread and wine in the Eucharist. This had been one of Hus's central concerns and became a symbol of reform.

The Utraquists sought:

- Moral reform of the clergy
- Greater access to Scripture and preaching
- Limited changes within the existing church structure

Crucially, however, they believed reform could be achieved *through negotiation and accommodation with political and ecclesiastical power*. Their aim was not to dismantle Christendom, but to improve it.

For a time, this approach offered stability. It preserved order, avoided the worst excesses of violence, and allowed reform to survive institutionally. Yet it also carried a cost. Compromise blunted the original moral urgency that had animated Hus's witness. The Church remained entangled with the state, and conscience was once again mediated through authority. For later critics, this path appeared safe but incomplete — reform without transformation.

Within the Utraquist movement, leadership divided broadly between conservative and moderate figures, reflecting differing visions of how far reform should go. The conservative wing was represented above all by **Jan of Příbram (**c.1380–1450), who accepted communion in both kinds as a legitimate concession but otherwise sought to preserve traditional Catholic doctrine, clerical hierarchy, and sacramental theology, emphasising continuity with the medieval Church and eventual reconciliation with Rome. By contrast, the moderate leaders — most notably **Jacob of Mies** (Jakoubek ze Stříbra, d.1429) and later **Jan Rokycana** (c.1396–1471) — treated the chalice as a non-negotiable requirement grounded in Scripture and the practice of the early Church, while also advocating moral reform, vernacular preaching, and a disciplined but non-revolutionary church life. Together, these figures shaped

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Utraquism as a broad, internally plural movement that sought a middle way between Roman authority and radical Hussite innovation.

The Taborites: The Kingdom Enforced

At the opposite extreme stood the **Taborites**, named after the city of **Tábor**, founded in 1420 as a centre of radical reform. The Taborites believed the time for compromise had passed. The corruption of Church and society was too deep to be corrected gradually. God's judgement was near, and the faithful were called to act decisively.

Tabor City Today

They rejected:

- Much of Catholic sacramental practice
- Veneration of saints and relics
- Ecclesiastical hierarchy

Many embraced:

- Communal ownership of goods
- Apocalyptic expectation
- Armed defence of the "true faith"

Under leaders such as **Jan Žižka (**c.1360–1424), the Taborites became a formidable military force. They saw themselves as instruments of divine justice, authorised to defend and establish God's order by force.

Their courage and discipline were undeniable. Yet their use of violence introduced a profound contradiction. In seeking to defend the Gospel, they adopted the very means — coercion and bloodshed — that Christ had refused. The Kingdom of God was no longer simply proclaimed or lived; it was enforced.

For later nonviolent reformers, this path represented a tragic confusion: faithfulness merged with domination.

The Pikarts: Freedom Without Form

Alongside both Utraquists and Taborites arose smaller, more extreme groups often labelled **Pikarts** (a.k.a. Picards - a term associated with heretics. From within the Pikart movement, a more radical faction later emerged that came to be known as the *Bohemian* **Adamites**), led by radical Hussite preachers **Martin Húska** (a.k.a. Loquis, c.1380–1421) and **Petr Kániš (**d.1421).

These communities rejected not only the institutional Church, but also many forms of moral and communal discipline. Some believed they had entered a state of spiritual perfection in which ordinary moral rules no longer applied.

Accounts of Pikart beliefs and practices vary, but contemporaries — including other Hussites — were alarmed by:

- Rejection of sacraments and clergy
- Disregard for marriage and social norms
- Claims of sinlessness or special spiritual status

Whether all accusations were fair or not, the perception was clear: spiritual freedom had dissolved into disorder. Even the Taborites, themselves radical reformers, moved to suppress the Pikarts violently.

The Pikarts illustrated a different danger: that rejection of authority, if unmoored from discipline and accountability, could collapse into chaos.

Martin Húska

A Threefold Crisis

By the early 1430s, the Hussite world had fractured along three lines:

- **Reform with power** (Utraquists)
- **Reform by force** (Taborites)
- **Freedom without order** (Pikarts)

Each path arose from a genuine attempt to be faithful. Each also revealed a serious limitation.

What was missing was a way of life that:

- Refused violence without retreating into passivity
- Rejected power without abandoning order
- Affirmed conscience without dissolving community

It is at this point — often overlooked amid the drama of wars and councils — that a quieter, more demanding voice becomes audible. Petr Chelčický neither marched with armies nor negotiated with princes. He wrote, reflected, and insisted that the Gospel itself already contained the answer, if only Christians

were willing to accept its cost.

The next chapter turns to that voice.

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Chapter 3

Petr Chelčický and the Refusal of Power

Amid the upheaval that followed the death of Jan Hus, **Petr Chelčický** stands apart. He founded no city, commanded no armies, and negotiated no settlements. He sought neither compromise nor conquest. Instead, he asked a question more unsettling than any raised by the Hussite wars themselves: *what if Christianity had gone wrong not in degree, but in direction?*

Chelčický lived in rural Bohemia during the height of Hussite conflict. He was aware of all the factions that claimed Hus's legacy, and he judged them with an unusual severity. In his view, the problem was not simply corruption, error, or excess. It was the very assumption that Christianity could coexist with coercive power.

This conviction found its fullest expression in his principal work, the *Net of Faith*.

The Net Torn

Frontispiece Illustration of the 1521 Edition of The Net of Faith
Printed in the Monastery of Vilémov

(The net is held by four apostles and in the net are the righteous Christians. One sinner is falling overboard and another is escaping through a big hole in the torn net. Below, protruding from the open jaw of an infernal leviathan, the devil is roping in the pope, the emperor, the learned doctors, and other sinners.)

Chelčický's central image is drawn from the Gospel: Christ casts a net to gather his followers. That net, Chelčický argues, was whole during the time of the apostles. It was torn when Christianity aligned itself with worldly power — most decisively under the Emperor Constantine.

From that moment on, he believed, the Church ceased to be a community formed by obedience and became an institution maintained by law, force, and privilege. Bishops became rulers, rulers became protectors of doctrine, and violence entered Christian life not as a failure, but as a tool.

For Chelčický, this was not a secondary error. It was a fundamental betrayal of Christ's teaching.

Christ and the Sword

Chelčický's rejection of violence was absolute. He denied not only aggressive war, but defensive war, punitive violence, and coercive authority of every kind. Christians, he argued, were forbidden to:

- kill
- punish
- compel obedience
- rule over others by force

This was not naïveté. Chelčický understood the dangers of lawlessness and disorder. But he insisted that Christians were called to live by a different rule altogether — one that did not depend on fear or compulsion.

Christ had refused the sword. Therefore, Christians could not take it up without ceasing to follow him.

This refusal placed Chelčický at odds with every major faction of his time. He rejected the Church's alliance with princes, the Taborites' armed struggle, and the Pikarts' rejection of moral order. Each, in his view, compromised the Gospel in a different way.

Oaths, Law, and Truth

From this same logic followed Chelčický's rejection of oaths. Oaths, he argued, exist because society does not trust truth to be spoken freely. They bind speech to authority and punishment rather than to integrity.

For the Christian, this was unnecessary and harmful. Truthfulness was not situational. A Christian's word should be the same in court, in commerce, and in private life. To swear an oath was to admit that truth required enforcement.

This insistence on continual truthfulness would later find an almost exact echo among Friends, though separated by two centuries and different circumstances.

The Church as a Way of Life

Chelčický did not reject the Church; he redefined it. The true Church was not an institution, hierarchy, or legal body. It was the community of those who *lived* Christ's commands.

This community was marked by:

- mutual care
- moral discipline
- simplicity of life
- refusal of domination

Chelčický had no patience for spiritual enthusiasm detached from conduct. Freedom, for him, meant obedience — not to rules, but to Christ. Where that obedience was lacking, spiritual claims were empty.

In this respect, he differed sharply from the Pikarts. While they dissolved discipline in the name of spiritual liberty, Chelčický insisted that genuine freedom was demanding and exacting.

Withdrawal Without Escape

Chelčický is sometimes described as advocating withdrawal from society. This is misleading. He did not urge Christians to flee the world, but to live within it without ruling it.

Christians, he believed, should:

- work
- serve
- care for the poor
- endure injustice without retaliation

What they must not do was dominate, coerce, or punish. The world, he accepted, would continue to operate by law and force. The Church must not.

This separation was ethical rather than geographical. It was a refusal to let the means of the world shape the life of faith.

A Quiet Centre

Chelčický's writings circulated quietly. They attracted no armies and inspired no uprisings. Yet their influence proved durable precisely because they refused immediacy and power.

In time, his ideas would give rise to disciplined, pacifist communities that sought to live the Gospel without compromise. But even without tracing that later history, Chelčický stands as a figure of rare clarity: a Christian thinker who refused to choose between order and nonviolence, between conscience and community.

For Friends reading today, his work may feel uncannily familiar. Not because he anticipated Quakerism in form, but because he arrived, by a different road, at the same inward necessity: that faithfulness to Christ cannot be enforced, defended by violence, or safeguarded by power.

The next chapter turns from thought to practice, examining how these demanding convictions took shape in the life of a real community.

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Chapter 4

The Unity of the Brethren: Discipline Without Coercion

Chelčický himself did not found a church. He was wary of institutions, aware of how easily they hardened into authority and control. Yet his writings did not remain abstract. They were taken up by men and women who sought to live, together, the kind of Christian life he described — a life shaped by obedience rather than force.

Early gathering of the Unity of the Brethren (Unitas Fratrum)

Out of this impulse emerged the **Unity of the Brethren**, founded in 1457 in eastern Bohemia. Also known as the *Unitas Fratrum*, the Brethren represented neither a compromise with power nor a retreat into individual spirituality. They were an attempt to embody, in community, a non-coercive Christianity.

A Church Without the Sword

The Brethren accepted Chelčický's central conviction: that Christianity and coercive power were incompatible. They rejected military service, refused to bear arms, and declined roles that required the use of force or punishment. This pacifism was not theoretical. It shaped everyday decisions and exposed members to risk.

Yet the Brethren did not equate nonviolence with passivity. They organised themselves carefully, recognising that a community without external enforcement required *greater*, not lesser, moral responsibility.

Order Without Domination

One of the most striking features of the Unity of the Brethren was its emphasis on discipline. This discipline was not imposed by threat, but sustained through mutual accountability.

Key features included:

- shared moral expectations
- careful oversight of members' conduct
- processes for correction and reconciliation
- simplicity of life and economic restraint

Leadership existed, but it was understood as service rather than command. Authority arose from trust and example, not office or coercion.

In this respect, the Brethren avoided the twin dangers that had divided the Hussite world: the use of power on the one hand, and the collapse of order on the other.

Sacraments and Simplicity

Unlike Quakers, the Brethren retained outward sacraments. Yet they stripped them of ritual excess and refused to treat them as instruments of control or exclusion. Sacraments were understood as aids to faith, not as mechanisms of authority.

More important than outward forms was the shape of daily life:

- plain speech
- honest labour
- care for the poor
- refusal of oaths
- truthfulness in all dealings

Faith was not confined to worship, but expressed continuously.

A Community Under Pressure

The Brethren were never a dominant force. Their refusal to align with political power made them vulnerable, and periods of persecution followed. Yet their very marginality protected them from the corruptions Chelčický had feared. Without princes to please or armies to command, they remained small, disciplined, and resilient.

Their survival demonstrated something crucial: that a Christian community could exist without violence, hierarchy, or state protection — but only at the cost of comfort and security.

A Bridge, Not a Culmination

The Unity of the Brethren does not mark the end of this story, but a moment of balance. In them, Chelčický's demanding ethic found social form. They showed that it was possible to live a Gospel-shaped life without enforcing it.

For Quaker readers, the Brethren may feel closer in spirit than in form. Their use of sacraments and structured oversight differs from later Friends' practice. Yet the underlying logic — that faithfulness must be voluntary, disciplined, and peaceable — is strikingly familiar.

The next chapter turns to that recognition directly, setting Chelčický's vision alongside the testimonies of Friends, not to claim inheritance, but to illuminate a shared understanding of what it means to follow Christ without power.

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Chapter 5

The Net and Testimonies: Petr Chelčický and the Way of Friends

What follows is not a claim of influence, inheritance, or continuity in the historical sense. There is no evidence that early Friends knew the writings of **Petr Chelčický**, nor that his *Net of Faith* circulated in seventeenth-century England. And yet, when the two are placed side by side, the resemblance is too deep to be accidental.

What Chelčický and the early Friends share is not a set of doctrines, but a **moral and spiritual logic**: a conviction that obedience to Christ is indivisible, that faith cannot be protected by power, and that truth must be lived continuously rather than enforced episodically.

This chapter sets Chelčický's central insights alongside the testimonies of Friends, not to flatten their differences, but to illuminate the common ground on which they stand.

Christ as the Only Authority

At the centre of Chelčický's thought lies a radical simplicity: Christ alone is authoritative. All other authorities — ecclesiastical, legal, or political — are to be judged by their faithfulness to Christ's teaching and example. Where they contradict it, they lose their claim to obedience.

For Chelčický, the catastrophe of Christianity began when the Church accepted protection and power from the state. From that moment, obedience shifted subtly but decisively: no longer directed inwardly to Christ, but outwardly to office, law, and force.

Early Friends arrived at the same point by a different road. They spoke not of tearing nets, but of the **Inward Light**, the living presence of Christ guiding the conscience directly. No creed, minister, or institution could substitute for this inward authority. Indeed, any such substitution was a form of disobedience.

In both cases, authority is relocated:

- from institution to conscience,
- from enforcement to discernment,
- from doctrine imposed to truth revealed inwardly.

This shared move explains much that follows.

Violence and the Peace Testimony

Chelčický's rejection of violence is uncompromising. He does not distinguish between just and unjust wars, defensive and aggressive force, or lawful and unlawful killing. Christ's refusal of the sword admits no exceptions. To kill in Christ's name is, for Chelčický, to deny Christ altogether.

This logic anticipates, with striking clarity, the Quaker peace testimony. Early Friends did not argue primarily from political theory or humanitarian concern. They argued from obedience. Christ had ended the outward wars; therefore, his followers could not participate in them.

In both cases, peace is not a strategy but a consequence. It follows from taking the Gospel at its word.

This also explains why neither Chelčický nor Friends limited their concern to war alone. Violence appears wherever coercion rules — in courts, punishments, oaths, and domination. Peace, correspondingly, is not merely the absence of war, but a way of life marked by patience, endurance, and refusal to compel.

Oaths and the Integrity of Speech

Chelčický's rejection of oaths flows directly from his understanding of truth. Oaths exist because truth is conditional. They introduce a division between ordinary speech and solemn speech, implying that honesty must sometimes be reinforced by fear of punishment.

For the Christian, Chelčický insists, this division is intolerable. Truth must be continuous. A Christian's word must be the same everywhere, to everyone, at all times.

Friends reached precisely the same conclusion. Their refusal to swear oaths was not stubborn literalism, but an insistence that integrity could not be segmented. Truthfulness was not something to be switched on in court and relaxed elsewhere. It was a way of being.

This testimony, so often misunderstood as eccentricity, appears here as a direct corollary of inward obedience.

Sacraments, Forms, and Inward Reality

Chelčický was deeply suspicious of sacramentalism. He did not deny the value of outward practices altogether, but he believed that ritual had become a substitute for obedience. Sacraments were administered by authority, guarded by force, and treated as instruments of control.

Friends went further, dispensing with outward sacraments entirely. Yet the underlying concern is the same: that outward signs must never replace inward reality.

In both cases, the danger lies not in form itself, but in **reliance on form**. When faith is measured by participation in ritual rather than transformation of life, Christianity becomes manageable, enforceable, and ultimately corruptible.

Equality and the Refusal of Hierarchy

Chelčický's critique of hierarchy extends beyond church offices to social structure itself. Feudal rank, clerical privilege, and domination of one person by another all stand under judgement. For him, hierarchy is not merely a social arrangement, but a spiritual distortion.

Early Friends expressed the same insight in different language. Their refusal of titles, hat honour, and deferential speech was not social rebellion for its own sake. It was a refusal to participate in systems that elevated some above others in contradiction to Christ's teaching.

Both Chelčický and Friends understood equality not as sameness, but as **shared subjection to Christ alone**.

Discipline Without Coercion

Here Chelčický's proximity to Friends becomes especially clear. He rejected both authoritarian control and spiritual anarchy. Obedience, he argued, was demanding. Freedom meant responsibility, not licence.

This insistence finds a close parallel in Quaker practice. Friends rejected priests and sacraments, but they did not reject order. Meetings for worship, meetings for business, eldership, and processes of discernment all arose from the recognition that inward guidance required communal testing.

Neither Chelčický nor Friends trusted unexamined enthusiasm. Spiritual claims had to be measured against conduct, humility, and consistency.

Withdrawal and Engagement

Chelčický urged Christians to refrain from exercising coercive power, including holding offices that required punishment or violence. Friends initially took a similar stance, refusing roles tied to oaths, military service, or enforcement.

Over time, Friends developed more varied approaches to political engagement. Yet the tension remains alive within Quakerism: how to witness in the world without becoming entangled in its mechanisms of domination.

Chelčický's clarity here can be unsettling. He offers no easy accommodation, only the question: *what does faithfulness require, even when it costs?*

Recognition, Not Ancestry

The parallels traced here do not imply that Quakerism is the heir of Chelčický, nor that history unfolds along a single hidden line. Rather, they suggest that when Christians take the Sermon on the Mount with full seriousness, similar conclusions emerge, even across centuries and cultures.

Chelčický did not anticipate Friends in form. He did not sit in silence, nor speak of an Inner Light in Quaker language. Yet the spiritual demand he articulates — to live truthfully, peaceably, and without power — is one that Friends have recognised and borne.

In that sense, Chelčický belongs to the same family of witness: not an ancestor, but a companion across time.

The next chapter brings Chelčický into conversation with Robert Barclay, not in order to suggest direct influence, but to explore a shared refusal: the refusal to allow the truth of Christ's teaching to be captured by power, system, or coercive certainty. By setting The Net of Faith alongside An Apology for the True Christian Divinity, the chapter asks how two thinkers, separated by three centuries, each resisted the re-entangling of the Gospel in structures that claimed to defend it.

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Chapter 6

Faith Lived and Faith Known

Robert Barclay and Petr Chelčický's Net of Faith

Friends often sense that Quaker faith did not arise in isolation. Long before the rise of the Religious Society of Friends in seventeenth-century England, there were Christians who questioned the union of Church and state, rejected violence, and sought a faith grounded in the life and teaching of Christ rather than in external authority. Among the most remarkable of these was Petr Chelčický, whose work Net of Faith anticipates many concerns later expressed by Friends.

This chapter places Chelčický alongside Robert Barclay, the great Quaker theologian, not to claim a direct historical influence, but to show a deep spiritual kinship. Their agreement is striking; their differences are illuminating.

Christ as the Measure of All Things

Chelčický begins from a simple but demanding conviction: Christ's teaching is sufficient. For him, the Sermon on the Mount is not an ideal to be admired but a rule to be obeyed. The tragedy of Christian history, he argues, is that the Church abandoned this simplicity when it allied itself with worldly power. The "net of faith" — meant to gather people into Christ's life — was torn when coercion, law, and violence were allowed to enter.

Barclay, writing two centuries later, shares the same Christ-centred vision, but approaches it differently. For Barclay, Christ is not only the historical teacher whose words we follow; Christ is also present inwardly, continuing to teach his people directly. This inward teaching — which Friends call the Light — is the primary source of Christian knowledge. Scripture remains precious and authoritative, but as a secondary witness, confirming what Christ teaches within.

Here we see the first important distinction:

- Chelčický emphasises obedience to Christ's outward teaching.
- Barclay emphasises knowledge of Christ's inward teaching, from which obedience flows.

Both reject external authority imposed by church or state. Both insist that Christ himself must rule the believer's life.

The True Church

For Chelčický, the true Church is never identical with any institution. It is the quiet fellowship of those who seek to live faithfully after Christ. When the Church claims power — when it blesses armies, enforces belief, or rules through law — it ceases to be Christ's body and becomes something else entirely.

Barclay agrees. The true Church, he writes, is recognised not by buildings, clergy, or ceremonies, but by the presence of the Spirit. Friends therefore

rejected ordained priesthood, outward sacraments, and fixed liturgies, not out of hostility to tradition, but out of faithfulness to Christ's immediate guidance.

Chelčický is uncompromisingly anti-institutional; Barclay allows for practical forms of order — elders, meetings, discipline — but only insofar as these remain non-coercive and Spirit-led. Authority, for both, belongs to God alone.

Violence, Power, and the State

On the question of violence, Chelčický speaks with extraordinary clarity. Christians, he insists, must not kill, judge, coerce, or rule by force. Participation in war or state power represents a fundamental betrayal of Christ's way. The fusion of Church and Empire is, for him, the great corruption of Christianity.

Barclay's defence of Quaker pacifism stands firmly in the same tradition. He rejects war, oath-taking, and coercion, arguing that Christ's kingdom operates by persuasion and love alone. While Barclay is more cautious in political language, the outcome is the same: Friends cannot take part in violence without denying their faith.

Chelčický's voice here sounds almost prophetic — severe, uncompromising, and morally urgent. Barclay's voice is calmer and more reasoned, but no less firm.

What Is Faith?

Perhaps the deepest difference between the two lies in their understanding of faith itself.

For Chelčický, faith is shown above all in faithful living. Christianity is not primarily a matter of correct belief, but of visible obedience: truthfulness, humility, non-violence, and love of enemies. A faith that does not transform behaviour is no faith at all.

Barclay agrees — but adds another dimension. Faith is also a form of knowledge: a direct, inward certainty given by God. Friends do not obey Christ merely because they admire his teaching, but because they have encountered him inwardly. This encounter grounds both conviction and action.

In modern terms, we might say:

- Chelčický emphasises faith as discipleship.
- Barclay emphasises faith as inward experience.

For Friends, these two belong together.

Theology Without Scholasticism

Neither Chelčický nor Barclay trusted scholastic theology. Chelčický rejected system-building altogether, preferring parable, image, and moral critique. Theology, he believed, becomes dangerous when it replaces life.

Barclay, paradoxically, wrote a systematic theology — but only to dismantle the authority of systems. His Apology uses the tools of learned argument to show that true Christianity cannot be confined to doctrine alone. Reason has its place, but it must remain servant to the Spirit.

Why This Matters for Friends Today

Chelčický reminds Friends that the ethical demands of Christianity are real and costly. Barclay reminds us that obedience must be rooted in living encounter, not moral effort alone. Together, they offer a vision of Christianity that is both inward and outward, experiential and practical, gentle and demanding.

Chelčický asks:

How has Christ's simple way been betrayed by power?

Barclay asks:

How does Christ continue to teach his people today?

Friends may recognise both questions as their own.

Reflection Query

How do we, as Friends today, keep faith both alive inwardly and faithful outwardly, without allowing either discipline or experience to replace the living guidance of Christ?

The final chapter will draw these threads together, returning to the image with which Chelčický began — the net that Christ cast — and asking what it might mean, for Friends today, to refuse to tear it anew.

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Conclusion

The Untorn Thread

Petr Chelčický closed *Net of Faith* with an image rather than a programme. Christ, he wrote, cast a net to gather his followers. That net was not torn by persecution or weakness, but by alliance with power. When force entered the life of faith, the strands separated. What had been held together by love was pulled apart by authority.

This image has endured because it names a recurring temptation. Again and again, Christian communities have been offered protection, influence, or effectiveness at the cost of inward faithfulness. Again and again, the promise has been that power could be used responsibly, gently, or temporarily — and again and again, the means have shaped the end.

The figures and movements traced in this booklet lived in circumstances far removed from our own. Medieval Bohemia was a world of feudal obligation, religious uniformity, and open violence. Yet the moral questions they faced are recognisably the same. How is truth to be spoken? How is community to be ordered? What place does force have in the life of faith? And what must be refused, even when refusal brings loss?

Jan Hus answered with conscience and paid with his life. The Hussite movement answered in multiple, conflicting ways — through compromise, through violence, and through excess — each revealing something essential, and each falling short. Petr Chelčický answered by refusing the terms of the question altogether. He declined to choose between order and peace, between faith and discipline, between conscience and community. Instead, he insisted that the Gospel itself already contained its own form of life, if Christians were willing to accept its cost.

Friends came to similar conclusions two centuries later, without knowledge of Chelčický's writings and under very different conditions. They, too, refused oaths, violence, sacraments administered by authority, and hierarchies that elevated some above others. They, too, discovered that inward obedience required outward consistency, and that freedom demanded discipline.

What binds these witnesses together is not a shared tradition, but a shared refusal: the refusal to allow faith to be managed by power.

For Friends today, this history offers neither comfort nor instruction in the usual sense. It does not tell us what to do. It reminds us instead of what is always at stake. The temptation to soften the demands of truth, to separate belief from conduct, or to rely on influence rather than faithfulness has never disappeared. It merely takes new forms.

Chelčický did not imagine a pure church preserved from failure. Nor did early Friends. What they trusted instead was the possibility of obedience — imperfect, costly, and continually renewed — lived in community without coercion.

The net, once torn, cannot be repaired by force. It can only be held together by the same spirit in which it was first cast.

If this booklet has any purpose, it is not to recover a lost lineage, but to recognise a familiar voice. That voice still asks, quietly and persistently, what it means to follow Christ without power — and whether we are willing to do so.

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